

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY**

JOHN L. HARRIS, III,	:	
	:	Civil Action No. 09-2914 (JAP)
Plaintiff,	:	
	:	
	:	
v.	:	OPINION
	:	
N.J. STATE PAROLE BOARD,	:	
	:	
Defendant.	:	

APPEARANCES:

JOHN L. HARRIS, III, Plaintiff pro se
#537294
Mercer County Correctional Center
P.O. Box 8068
Trenton, New Jersey 08650

PISANO, District Judge

Plaintiff, John L. Harris, III, a convicted state prisoner confined at the Mercer County Correctional Center in Trenton, New Jersey, at the time he submitted this Complaint for filing, seeks to bring this action in forma pauperis. Plaintiff provides an affidavit of indigency and his inmate account statement. Based on Plaintiff's affidavit of indigency, and the absence of three qualifying dismissals within 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g), the Court will grant both Plaintiff's application to proceed in forma pauperis ("IFP") pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a) (1998) and order the Clerk of the Court to file the Complaint.

At this time, the Court must review the Complaint, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A, to determine whether it should be dismissed as frivolous or malicious, for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or because it seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. For the reasons set forth below, the Court concludes that the Complaint should be dismissed without prejudice at this time.

I. BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, John L. Harris, III, brings this civil action, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, against the New Jersey State Parole Board ("NJSPB"). (Complaint, Caption and ¶ 4b). The following factual allegations are taken from the Complaint, and are accepted for purposes of this screening only. The Court has made no findings as to the veracity of Plaintiff's allegations.

Plaintiff states that the NJSPB has been holding him "hostage" since June 4, 2009. Plaintiff claims that he "maxed out" on his state sentence on June 4, 2009, but he is being held on a parole detainer. His Complaint is dated June 10, 2009.¹ Plaintiff seeks compensatory damages in the amount of \$500,000.00

¹ This Court notes that the New Jersey Department of Corrections Inmate Locator shows that Plaintiff was released from custody on June 5, 2009. See https://www6.state.nj.us/DOC_Inmate/details?x=1023768&n=9.

per day for every day he is held over his maximum release date of June 4, 2009.

II. STANDARDS FOR A SUA SPONTE DISMISSAL

The Prison Litigation Reform Act ("PLRA"), Pub. L. No. 104-134, §§ 801-810, 110 Stat. 1321-66 to 1321-77 (April 26, 1996), requires a district court to review a complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner is proceeding in forma pauperis or seeks redress against a governmental employee or entity. The Court is required to identify cognizable claims and to sua sponte dismiss any claim that is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A. This action is subject to sua sponte screening for dismissal under both 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A, because Gatson is a prisoner and is proceeding as an indigent, and because plaintiff Hanks is proceeding as an indigent.

In determining the sufficiency of a pro se complaint, the Court must be mindful to construe it liberally in favor of the plaintiff. See Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 93-94 (2007) (following Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976) and Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520-21 (1972)). See also United States v. Day, 969 F.2d 39, 42 (3d Cir. 1992). The Court must "accept as true all of the allegations in the complaint and all

reasonable inferences that can be drawn therefrom, and view them in the light most favorable to the plaintiff.” Morse v. Lower Merion School Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). The Court need not, however, credit a pro se plaintiff’s “bald assertions” or “legal conclusions.” Id.

A complaint is frivolous if it “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989) (interpreting the predecessor of § 1915(e)(2), the former § 1915(d)). The standard for evaluating whether a complaint is “frivolous” is an objective one. Deutsch v. United States, 67 F.3d 1080, 1086-87 (3d Cir. 1995).

A pro se complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim only if it appears “‘beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which would entitle him to relief.’” Haines, 404 U.S. at 521 (quoting Conley v. Gibson, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (1957)). See also Erickson, 551 U.S. at 93-94 (in a pro se prisoner civil rights complaint, the Court reviewed whether the complaint complied with the pleading requirements of Rule 8(a)(2)).

However, recently, the Supreme Court refined this standard for summary dismissal of a Complaint that fails to state a claim in Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009). The issue before the Supreme Court was whether Iqbal’s civil rights complaint adequately alleged defendants’ personal involvement in

discriminatory decisions regarding Iqbal's treatment during detention at the Metropolitan Detention Center which, if true, violated his constitutional rights. Id. The Court examined Rule 8(a)(2) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure which provides that a complaint must contain "a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief." Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2).² Citing its recent opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), for the proposition that "[a] pleading that offers 'labels and conclusions' or 'a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do,'" Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949 (quoting Twombly, 550 U.S. at 555), the Supreme Court identified two working principles underlying the failure to state a claim standard:

First, the tenet that a court must accept as true all of the allegations contained in a complaint is inapplicable to legal conclusions. Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice Rule 8 ... does not unlock the doors of discovery for a plaintiff armed with nothing more than conclusions. Second, only a complaint that states a plausible claim for relief survives a motion to dismiss. Determining whether a complaint states a plausible claim for relief will ... be a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense. But where the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged-but it has not "show[n]"-"that the pleader is entitled to relief." Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2).

² Rule 8(d)(1) provides that "[e]ach allegation must be simple, concise, and direct. No technical form is required." Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(d).

Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949-50 (citations omitted).

The Court further explained that

a court considering a motion to dismiss can choose to begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausible give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1950.

Thus, to prevent a summary dismissal, civil complaints must now allege "sufficient factual matter" to show that a claim is facially plausible. This then allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged. Id. at 1948. The Supreme Court's ruling in Iqbal emphasizes that a plaintiff must demonstrate that the allegations of his complaint is plausible. Id. at 1949-50; see also Twombly, 505 U.S. at 555, & n.3; Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, ___ F.3d ___, 2009 WL 2501662, *4 (3d Cir., Aug. 18, 2009).

Consequently, the Third Circuit observed that Iqbal provides the "final nail-in-the-coffin" for the "no set of facts" standard set forth in Conley v. Gibson, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (1957),³ that

³ In Conley, as stated above, a district court was permitted to summarily dismiss a complaint for failure to state a claim only if "it appear[ed] beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which would entitle him to relief. Id., 355 U.S. at 45-46. Under this "no set of facts" standard, a complaint could effectively survive a motion to dismiss so long as it contained a bare recitation of the

applied to federal complaints before Twombly. Fowler, 2009 WL 2501662, *5. The Third Circuit now requires that a district court must conduct the two-part analysis set forth in Iqbal when presented with a motion to dismiss:

First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. [Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949-50]. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a "plausible claim for relief." [Id.] In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to "show" such an entitlement with its facts. See Phillips, 515 F.3d at 234-35. As the Supreme Court instructed in Iqbal, "[w]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged-but it has not 'show [n]'-that the pleader is entitled to relief.'" Iqbal, [129 S.Ct. at 1949-50]. This "plausibility" determination will be "a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense." Id.

Fowler, 2009 WL 2501662, *5.

This Court is mindful, however, that the sufficiency of this pro se pleading must be construed liberally in favor of Plaintiff, even after Iqbal. See Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89 (2007). Moreover, a court should not dismiss a complaint with prejudice for failure to state a claim without granting leave to amend, unless it finds bad faith, undue delay, prejudice or futility. See Grayson v. Mayview State Hosp., 293 F.3d 103, 110-111 (3d Cir. 2002); Shane v. Fauver, 213 F.3d 113, 117 (3d Cir. 2000).

claim's legal elements.

III. SECTION 1983 ACTIONS

Plaintiff brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

Section 1983 provides in relevant part:

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory ... subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress

Thus, to state a claim for relief under § 1983, a plaintiff must allege, first, the violation of a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States and, second, that the alleged deprivation was committed or caused by a person acting under color of state law. West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); Piecknick v. Pennsylvania, 36 F.3d 1250, 1255-56 (3d Cir. 1994).

The New Jersey State Parole Board is not a "person" subject to suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. See Will v. Michigan Dept. of State Police, 491 U.S. 58, 68-70 (1989) (holding that States and governmental entities considered "arms of the State" for Eleventh Amendment purposes are not "persons" within the meaning of § 1983); Madden v. New Jersey State Parole Board, 483 F.2d 1189, 1190 (3d Cir.1981) (stating that the New Jersey State Parole Board is not a person under § 1983). Therefore, the Complaint will be dismissed with prejudice, in its entirety, as against defendant, New Jersey State Parole Board.

IV. ANALYSIS

While the named defendant should be dismissed from this action, the Court is otherwise obligated to review Plaintiff's Complaint to determine whether he states a cognizable claim. Here, it appears that Plaintiff is asserting a due process claim that he is being held in excess of his maximum term of confinement.

However, the exclusive federal remedy for an inmate challenging the fact or length/duration of his confinement is a petition for a writ of habeas corpus. See Preiser v. Rodriguez, 411 U.S. 475 (1973). "[W]hen a state prisoner is challenging the very fact or duration of his physical imprisonment, and the relief he seeks is a determination that he is entitled to immediate release or a speedier release from that imprisonment, his sole federal remedy is a writ of habeas corpus." Preiser, 411 U.S. at 500; see also Wolff v. McDonnell, 418 U.S. 539, 554 (1974); Brown v. Fauver, 819 F.2d 395 (3d Cir. 1987).

Moreover, to the extent that Plaintiff seeks pecuniary relief, his claim has not accrued because a favorable judgment would necessarily imply the invalidity of his underlying criminal conviction and sentence. See Heck v. Humphrey, 512 U.S. 477 (1994). Where success in a plaintiff's § 1983 damages action would implicitly question the validity of confinement, the plaintiff must first achieve a favorable termination of his available state or federal habeas opportunities in order to

obtain relief under § 1983. See Muhammad v. Close, 540 U.S. 749, 751 (2004). Because federal habeas petitions may not be granted unless available state court remedies have been exhausted, see 28 U.S.C. § 2254(b)(1)(A), "conditioning the right to bring a § 1983 action on a favorable result in state litigation or federal habeas serve[s] the practical objective of preserving limitations on the availabilities of habeas remedies." Id.

Later, in Edwards v. Balisok, 510 U.S. 641 (1997), the Supreme Court applied the lessons of Preiser and Heck to a state prisoner action, seeking compensatory and punitive damages, challenging the constitutionality of procedures used in a prison disciplinary proceeding that resulted in the loss of good-time credits, but not necessarily challenging the result and not seeking the restoration of the good-time credits. The Court emphasized that such a claim is not cognizable under § 1983 if a favorable outcome would necessarily imply the invalidity of the challenged judgment, which in that case was the disciplinary finding and punishment. Edwards, 520 U.S. at 646-8.

In this case, it appears that Plaintiff takes issue with a parole detainer lodged against him preventing his release from jail at this time. However, he has not indicated that he has exhausted his state administrative and court remedies challenging the imposition of parole detainer. He also does not indicate that he challenged the computation of his sentence or that his incarceration was deemed to be in excess of his maximum term of

confinement by any state court or by the issuance of a writ of habeas corpus. Thus, this claim is barred under Preiser, as well as Heck and Balisok, because a favorable outcome in this case would necessarily imply the invalidity of the disciplinary finding that resulted in his parole detainer, see Harris v. Osman, et al., Civil No. 09-1928 (FLW). Plaintiff's sole federal remedy in this instance would be a writ of habeas corpus. Therefore, this Complaint, which challenges the fact of plaintiff's incarceration as being in excess of his maximum term of confinement, is not cognizable under § 1983, and should be dismissed without prejudice at this time.

Finally, to the extent that Plaintiff may already have been released from jail, as indicated by the New Jersey Department of Correction's Inmate Locator, see n.1 supra, this Complaint may be deemed moot.

V. CONCLUSION

Therefore, for the reasons set forth above, the Complaint will be dismissed without prejudice, for failure to state a claim at this time, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and 1915A(b)(1). An appropriate order follows.

/s/ JOEL A. PISANO
JOEL A. PISANO
United States District Judge

Dated: October 26, 2009